

Conference Abstract

Catching up with Archives - Disaster Preparedness and the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Berlin Museums

Peter Giere[‡], Henry Binder[§], Roland Pohl[|]

[‡] Museum für Naturkunde, Leibniz Institute for Evolution and Biodiversity Science, Berlin, Germany

[§] Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, Berlin, Germany

[|] Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany

Corresponding author: Peter Giere (peter.giere@mfn.berlin)

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Abstract

Cultural property can be lost in an instant - when disaster strikes, museum objects, archival material and other heritage items are in high danger of being damaged or lost in great numbers. To mitigate the effects of fire, flooding, earthquakes or even war, preparation for these incidents are needed during "times of peace", to use the terms of the Hague Convention. For museums and other institutions holding cultural property, this results in an obligation to run a risk assessment, to establish a disaster plan for their collections, and to link up with the local fire department or emergency services unit in preparation for the next emergency. Nevertheless, every hand is needed to recover objects from an institution after it was affected by a disaster in order to provide initial treatment as soon as possible. This necessity resulted, as in other countries, in the formation of networks of mutual assistance in Germany.

In 1997, following the Oder-River flooding in the state of Brandenburg, the archives of Berlin and Brandenburg came together to initiate such a network. This, however, is exclusive to archives and has not opened up to museums. Berlin museums, on the other hand, were slower in forming such a network. Being a city with more than 175 museums

and a history full of smaller and larger disasters not only to cultural institutions, it is hard to conceive why this notion did not gain ground earlier. It was only after a working group under the heads of administration in the Berlin Museum Association had been established that a network for museums was initiated and a co-operation agreement was drafted. This agreement is the basis for a new network of museums of various sizes and types, with the Museum für Naturkunde as one of the founding partners. This presentation explores disaster preparedness activities at the Museum für Naturkunde, with its 30 million objects, as well as the work of the new museum network for disaster preparedness.

Keywords

museum-network, objects, archives, institutional collaboration, Germany

Presenting author

Peter Giere, Museum für Naturkunde, Leibniz Institute for Evolution and Biodiversity Science, Berlin, Germany

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